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ABSTRACT

The 1998 "High Schools That Work" (HSTW) assessment contains good and bad news about the reading performance of the 23,900 career-bound students who participated in the assessment at experienced HSTW sites. Based on these findings, this research brief answers the following three questions: What progress are HSTW's sites making in advancing students' reading achievement? What conditions are associated with higher reading achievement? and How can schools get at least 85% of career-bound students to meet the HSTW reading goal? The brief first discusses reading achievement at HSTW sites, then focuses on some experiences associated with higher achievement in reading, and finally enumerates what districts and schools can do to improve the reading achievement of career-bound students. (Includes 5 tables and 2 figures.) (NKA)

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Research Brief

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Improving Reading and Writing Skills in Language Arts Courses and Across the Curriculum

by Gene Bottoms and Amy Bearman

The 1998 *High Schools That Work* Assessment contains good and bad news about the reading performance of the 23,900 career-bound students[1] who participated in the assessment at experienced *HSTW* sites.[2] Based on these findings, this research brief answers the following three questions:

- What progress are *HSTW* sites making in advancing students' reading achievement?
- What conditions are associated with higher reading achievement?
- How can schools get at least 85 percent of career-bound students to meet the *HSTW* reading goal?

Reading achievement at *High Schools That Work* sites

A comparison of the 1996 and 1998 assessment results shows that, at experienced *High Schools That Work* sites, all subgroups of students — male, female, white and minority — improved in reading. (See Figure 1.) In 1998, 51 percent of students at these sites met the *HSTW* reading goal[3] — an increase of eight percentage points since 1996. Thirty-nine percent of students at these sites — an increase of six percentage points since 1996 — completed the *HSTW*-recommended English curriculum of four college-preparatory-level courses. Even though a few more students in 1998 than in 1996 said they read, wrote and made presentations in all courses, schools need to use instructional strategies that will engage more students in reading and writing for learning. (See Table 1.)

Although some progress has been made, *HSTW* sites need to take additional steps to get 85 percent of career-bound students to meet or exceed the *HSTW* reading goal. Males and African-American students made greater strides than females and white students, but the gaps between girls and boys and between white students and African-American students remain large. (See Figure 1.) There also is a persistent lag in student performance in urban schools. While 38 percent of students throughout the *HSTW* network had scores "below basic,"[4] 53 percent of students in urban schools did.

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1 Career-bound students are the 60 percent to 65 percent of high school students whose plans for after high school graduation are to work; attend a two-year technical or community college; enroll in a four-year college or university with an open admissions policy; or enter the military.

2 Experienced *High Schools That Work* sites are schools that participated in both the 1996 and the 1998 *High Schools That Work* Assessments.

3 The *High Schools That Work* reading goal of 279 exceeds the minimum score for the "basic" level but does not reach the minimum score (304) for the "proficient" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Students who meet the *HSTW* reading goal can retrieve and use information from manuals, journals, periodicals and other documents; identify and solve stated problems; and recognize limitations in written materials.

4 Students whose scores are "below basic" do not demonstrate the overall understanding necessary to interpret text. They cannot state the main idea, determine an author's purpose or make logical connections between the text and real life.

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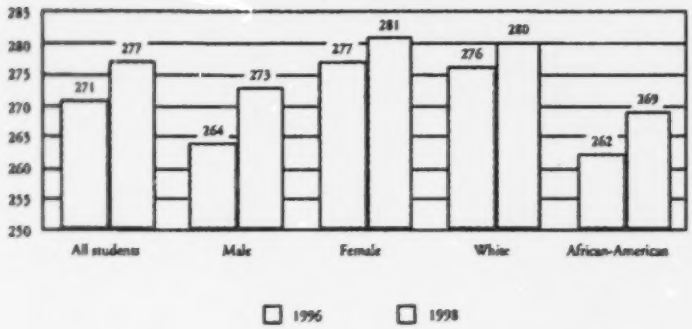
Figure 1
Average reading scores at experienced *HSTW* sites, 1996 and 1998



High Schools That Work has found that almost two-thirds of career-bound students are placed in lower-level English classes with very low expectations for reading and writing. If schools want to improve reading performance, they must give all students the experiences associated with higher achievement in reading.

Experiences associated with higher achievement in reading

- **Completing college-preparatory-level English courses**

Career-bound students who completed the *HSTW*-recommended English curriculum of four college-preparatory-level courses had higher scores on the *HSTW* reading test than did other students. Consider these findings:

- Students who completed the curriculum had an average score of 286, while the average score of those who did not complete the curriculum was 271.
- More than 60 percent of students who completed the curriculum met the *HSTW* performance goal of 279; of those who did not complete the curriculum, about 40 percent met this goal.
- For every subgroup of students — male, female, white and African-American — the average score of those who completed the curriculum was higher than the average score of those who did not. (See Figure 2.)

An examination of students' experiences in English classes at all *HSTW* sites in 1998 confirms that standards are higher in college-preparatory-level classes than in basic and general English classes. Students in college-prep classes read more, write more, make more oral presentations and analyze what they read. (See Table 2.) As a result of such experiences, their reading achievement is higher than that of students in lower-level classes.

Sixty-five percent of students who took low-level English courses at *HSTW* sites said they read no more than two assigned books outside of class per year. If students are not required to read, they miss opportunities to practice vital skills, such as using logical thought patterns to comprehend and interpret information. Reading is much more than Chaucer and Twain. Reading helps students learn to draw conclusions, connect what they read with real life, interpret text and use logical thought processes — skills needed in the workplace and daily life.

Career-bound students in all levels of English courses are not writing enough. Writing, an indispensable form of communication, develops students' abilities to interpret, summarize and analyze.

Table 1
Using language arts skills to learn academic and technical content at experienced *HSTW* sites

Experiences	Percent of students who had these experiences in high school: 1996	1998
Made presentations more than twice per year in:		
Mathematics	8	11
Science	23	27
Wrote more than two science reports per year	33	34
Completed more than two writing assignments per year that were graded by both an academic teacher and a vocational teacher	18	18
Read technical manuals to complete vocational assignments several times per year	72	68
Made a presentation in a vocational class	36	41
Wrote a report about an internship	32	35

Effective communication also requires the ability to present ideas so that others can understand them. All career fields — including mechanics, health and human services, and computers — involve explanations of what is happening and why it is happening. Students will need to be able to explain situations to all types of people in formal as well as informal settings. Despite the importance of oral communication, 72 percent of students taking low-level English courses at *HSTW* sites said they made two or fewer oral presentations per year.

Even college-preparatory-level English courses may not offer students the high-quality experiences they need. For example, nearly 25 percent of students who took upper-level English courses at *HSTW* sites said they did not read several assigned books per year outside of class. More than 80 percent spent no more than three hours per week reading. Half of the students read less than one hour per week. Students' writing experiences were no better: Nearly 70 percent were not required to complete short writing assignments for grades daily or weekly.

Figure 2
Average reading scores by demographic group and English class level

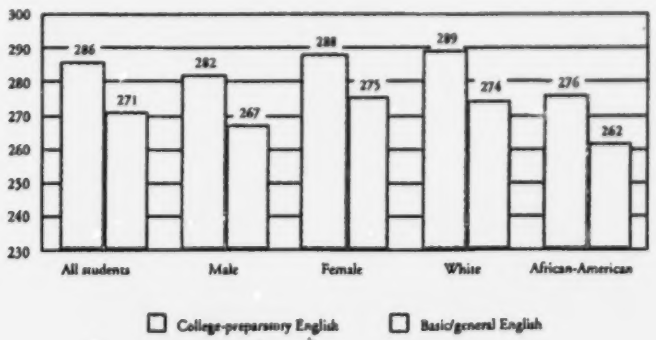


Table 2
Students' experiences in high school English classes

Experiences	Percent of students who had these experiences at *HSTW* sites: College-preparatory English	Basic/general English
Read several assigned books per year outside of class and reported the main ideas	76	55
Read outside of class for at least three hours per week	18	11
Made oral presentations on more than two assignments per year	64	28
Wrote more than two major research papers per year	32	18
Wrote an in-depth explanation of a topic per year	50	37
Received grades on short written assignments daily or weekly	31	15
Revised essays several times to improve quality	78	68

● **Reading, writing and speaking in all courses**

Many students enter high school unable to read efficiently and effectively, and all teachers — not just English teachers — should emphasize reading, writing and thinking in their classes. Teachers in courses other than English can incorporate reading assignments that help students both improve their reading skills and learn the course material. Teachers of these "content-area" courses can get students to take responsibility for their own learning and guide them as they practice reading.

Students who read, write and make oral presentations in classes in addition to English have higher average scores than those who do not. For example, the average score of students who frequently read technical manuals and other materials in their vocational classes was 12 points higher than the average score of students who did not. Students who wrote frequently in vocational classes had an average reading score that was 13 points higher than the average score of students who did not have such assignments. Oral presentations in vocational classes also were linked with higher achievement in reading; students who completed such assignments had a higher average score than those who didn't. Schools should provide teachers in all subject areas with staff development in incorporating reading skills into their classes. A greater emphasis on reading can help students improve their reading skills as well as their abilities to learn independently and to master the subject matter and skills in all classes.

● **Working hard to meet high expectations**

Career-bound students who completed college-preparatory-level English courses said they worked hard, met high standards and received the help they needed to meet those standards. On the other hand, students who took basic and general English classes were held to lower standards, were less likely to receive extra help and seldom were required to work hard outside of class. (See Table 3.)

When teachers set high standards, they may need to provide students with extra help. Students who take high-level English courses have greater access to extra help and ask for it more often than students in lower-level courses. (See Table 3.) All students can benefit from high standards and extra help.

What districts and schools can do to improve the reading achievement of career-bound students

- **Recognize that students are being shortchanged.**

Sixty-one percent of students who took the 1998 *HSTW* Assessment were not enrolled in college-preparatory English. These students are being denied access to an "advantaged" curriculum in language arts. But even those students who are enrolled in "advantaged" courses may be shortchanged. For example, 37 percent of students who completed four years of college-prep English at all *HSTW* sites did not meet the *HSTW* reading goal. Many students can turn in low-quality work and still earn credit in college-preparatory English courses that hold students to low standards.

- **Recognize that putting students into low-level English courses is a problem with the educational 'system.'**

Students who take lower-level English classes may not lack ability. The problem often is with the educational "system" rather than with the students. Since the 1994 *HSTW* Assessment, schools have made much more progress in increasing the percentages of students in higher-level mathematics courses than in increasing the percentages of students in higher-level English courses. (See Table 4.) For example, 77 percent of students at all *HSTW* sites completed the *HSTW*-recommended mathematics curriculum in 1998, compared with 37 percent who completed the *HSTW*-recommended English curriculum. *HSTW* Assessment results reflect schools' greater emphasis on higher-level mathematics than higher-level English: While 56 percent of students met the *HSTW* mathematics goal, only 49 percent met the reading goal.

When students do not read well, placing them in low-level English courses perpetuates the problem. These students need to read, write and analyze more, but they usually are expected to do less in low-level courses. If this pattern continues, students who read well will continue to improve while those who read poorly make little progress.

Table 3
Students' experiences with higher standards, greater effort and extra help

Experiences	Percent of students who had these experiences at *HSTW* sites: College-preparatory English	Basic/general English
Usually did not have homework	18	31
Completed at least one hour of homework per day	55	42
Knew what it took to earn an A or a B	87	82
Had teachers who required students to do their work	73	66
Had teachers who set high standards	84	77
Had challenging classes	62	55
Studied repetitive content	48	54
Had teachers who knew the content and made learning interesting	83	77
Had access to extra help	84	77
Never attended extra-help sessions	50	60
Said they did not need extra help	22	16

Table 4
Percent of students taking college-preparatory courses

	1994	1996	1998
English	7	32	37
Mathematics	52	66	77

Teachers recognize the need for change. More than half of the English teachers who participated in the 1998 *HSTW* Teacher Survey said their schools had not increased the number of reading, writing and homework assignments since becoming *HSTW* sites. Improvement depends on guidance and direction from district and school leaders, who can create, support and participate on teams to design a challenging language-arts curriculum for all students.

- **Adopt the language arts practices of high-achieving schools.**

Schools that want to raise standards in language arts should study the practices of high-achieving schools. *High Schools That Work* gathered information on the reading and writing expectations in language arts classes at three private high schools and four public high schools (*HSTW* sites). The differences were startling. Many career-bound students in the public high schools read and write very little. The study was not conclusive, but it did suggest that local schools may want to examine how their own expectations measure up to those at private high schools as well as high-achieving and low-achieving public high schools.

Private high schools create grade-level reading lists for language arts and other academic disciplines; require students to read during the summer and hold them accountable for this work; and establish common criteria for teachers to use in assessing students' writing. Students enrolled in the college-preparatory/honors curriculum in public high schools do more reading and writing than other students, but standards for the college-prep English curriculum in public high schools are significantly lower than those in private schools. For example, private school students are expected to do a major research paper every year. In many public high schools, a major research paper is not required until grade 11 or 12 for college-prep/honors students; lower-level language-arts courses may not require a major research paper at all. (See Table 5.)

- **Study *HSTW* sites that have raised reading achievement.**

Schools also can learn from *High Schools That Work* sites that have improved reading achieve-

One teacher's experience in teaching honors English to low-achieving students

When a high school principal placed 12 low-achieving students in honors English, the students thought they were in the wrong class. The teacher assured them that they belonged in the class, which would be taught to high standards. Once the students got over the initial shock, the results were amazing.

With the exception of writing instruction, the content for all students was the same. The 12 students, who had taken basic English in seventh grade, initially needed tutoring in writing. Eleven of them earned at least a C, and most of them took an honors English course the following year.

Table 5
Reading/language arts expectations
in a sample of private and public high schools

	Private	Public	
		College-prep	*Non-college-prep*
Number of assigned books for English per year	16 to 18	6 to 8	2 to 4
Number of assigned books for other subjects (not including textbooks) per year	4	0	0
Students read the equivalent of 30 books a year (including journals, articles, research materials, etc.)	Yes	No	No
Required reading list for summer	Yes	No	No
Schoolwide reading list by grade level	Yes	No	No
Policy on complexity of books required	Yes	No	No
Major research paper	9th through 12th	11th and 12th	Usually grade 12
Ouside writing required weekly	Yes	Varies	No
Schoolwide guidelines for grading writing	Yes	No	No
Homework every night	Yes	No	No

Source: Telephone survey of three private high schools and four *High Schools That Work* sites

ment significantly. One example is Eastern Guilford High School in Gibsonville, N.C., where the principal led English teachers in improving reading. Two important programs resulted from these efforts:

- **The school developed an accelerated-reader program that requires all students in grades nine through 12 to select and read two novels in each nine-week period.** This program is in addition to the regular assignment of eight novels outside of class per year. The teachers ensured quality, complexity and variety by providing a list of books from which students could choose.
- **The school developed a mandatory summer-reading program for students in grades nine through 12.** Students are required to read at least two novels from a recommended reading list during the summer and take tests on the books within the first six weeks of the new school year. Students in honors and Advanced Placement English courses read specified novels.

Eastern Guilford High School's efforts to improve the quantity, quality and assessment of reading propelled it past other *HSTW* sites on the 1998 *HSTW* Assessment in reading. While 71 percent of Eastern Guilford students who took the assessment met the reading goal, only 49 percent met the reading goal at all *HSTW* sites. Eastern Guilford's percentage also was higher than the 67 percent for high-scoring *HSTW* sites and the 63 percent for *HSTW* sites where students who took the assessment were similar to Eastern Guilford students demographically (family income, parental education).

Eastern Guilford High School also:

- tutors students in English and offers to reteach and retest students who do not meet standards in language arts;
- supports English teachers in coordinating projects with teachers of other subjects;
- assesses all students before they are placed in courses and uses the information to provide students with customized instruction that addresses their specific weaknesses in language arts;
- conducts mock testing sessions to give students practice for the state's end-of-course tests;

- maintains a bank of test items in language arts to help teachers hold all students to common standards; and
- provides after-school sessions to prepare students for the SAT.

There are several things that districts and schools can do to get 85 percent of career-bound students to meet the *HSTW* reading goal. The first step is to let parents and students know the expected level of performance, how the performance will be evaluated, and why standards and evaluation are needed. There are several other actions that districts and schools can take:

- They can require all students to complete four years of college-preparatory-level or honors English.
- Schools and districts can help English departments align all language-arts courses to the Council for Basic Education's standards for reading, writing, communicating, researching and thinking. The reading standards address the amount, variety and complexity of materials to be read. The writing standards address how to write in different forms and styles; how to use grammar, spelling and punctuation; and how to write for different audiences. All standards emphasize higher-order skills, such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, critical reading and research. Standards are aimed at teaching students to be independent learners.
- Schools and districts can develop a reading list for each grade level. They can specify the number of books or equivalent materials — at least 30, including textbooks, literature, scientific articles and technical materials — that students are expected to read across the curriculum each year. Students should be able to comprehend, analyze, interpret, compare and critique works in all subjects. Standards such as these will increase the amount and quality of students' reading and will provide ways to assess their work at each grade level.
- Schools and districts can provide workshops to help all teachers learn ways to teach reading and writing in their courses. More than 60 percent of academic and vocational teachers at *HSTW* sites in 1998 said they needed this type of training. Districts and schools can work together to deliver high-quality staff development that fulfills three purposes:
  - Staff development should prepare teachers to engage all students in reading and analyzing textbooks and other materials daily and in defending their interpretations individually and/or in groups.
  - Staff development should prepare teachers to require daily writing assignments in all classes and to use various styles, including summary, interpretation, persuasion, personal writing, narration, creative writing and analysis. Teachers should grade at least one formal writing assignment per week and should require frequent, informal, ungraded writing in all subjects.
  - Staff development should prepare teachers to require students routinely to gather information and use it in support of a particular point of view. Students should present this information formally in a research paper or presentation and informally in classroom discussions or debates.
- Districts and schools can require incoming ninth-graders with weak reading skills to participate in a reading program to help them catch up. The program should include summer initiatives, ninth-grade catch-up courses, after-school tutoring and other efforts.
- Districts and schools can collect information on the amount and type of reading — both in and out of class — that students do in language arts courses and other subjects. Such information can be used to compare expectations in different courses. Data linking students' reading experiences with their reading achievement can help principals and teacher leaders discuss with faculty, students and parents how to improve reading achievement.

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